



Harley

a story by Brooks Kohler

Eleven-year-old, freckle-faced, Harley held tight to the straps of her faded blue overalls as she strolled the aisle of her hometown library searching for the perfect book. As she browsed the brown wood shelves, aged by decades of love and dust, she hummed a popular radio melody while tapping her fingers against soft bindings. Shelf after shelf passed by with no particular interest because a book needed nothing more than something to make it stand out. Harley loved the colors and the font. This meant her growing fascination contained some books she understood and many more she did not.

From behind a massive wood counter covered in a white marble surface, professional, petite Sara kept one eye on her paperwork and the other on the small figure weaving in and out of the stacks. She observed Harley not make a decision for nearly fifteen minutes and formed an educated suspicion.

“Harley?” asked Sara.

The young girl paused, backed up, and poked her head out from behind a shelf.

“Are you planning to steal another book?”

Harley hid.

“Harley!” shouted Sara, moving quickly to go after her. “I better not see you with a book you plan to steal!”

Clinching a title, the young girl peered out from behind the shelf to see a bright red summer dress approaching.

“Harley!”

A rabbit’s dash, and Harley was to the cold slab steps leading down to the exit.

Sara chased. “Don’t you even think about it!”

Hop, skip, and jumping the steps, the girl landed hard on the library welcome mat. She stopped momentarily to see Sara’s bony pale arm reaching for her.

“Drop that book!”

With a mighty push, the double doors leading out opened, and Harley, along with a blast of cool air sucked from the calm library, rocketed into the frantic humid heat of a bright busy day.

Frustrated, Sara followed to the sidewalk to see blue overalls sprinting away. “Come back with

that book, young lady!”

Harley ran until arriving at a big hole in a wooden fence. She crouched, tossed the book in, and ducked head first through the hole to come out landing on a patch of dry leaves beneath a prickly cedar bush. Retrieving the book, she elbow crawled to a spot to poke her head out like a spying turtle from beneath the green. She looked to her left, her right, and with no one in sight, she pushed off to race across lawn after lawn to make it safely to her own and a wooden ladder attached to a tall tree in the backyard of a large, white, two story house. Atop the ladder, nesting between two thick branches, was a unpainted pine board tree house. Harley peered up, focused her aim, and with a practiced underhanded pitch, sent the book up and into the opening of the tree house.

The screen door to the back porch opened in time for Harley’s father, Adam, to see her tiny denim bottom rising rung by rung. Rolling the cuffs on his shirt he checked the time on his watch. “Did you steal another book?”

Safely inside her sweltering tree house, Harley slid the book to a growing pile and collapsed in a pant.

Below, Adam again called her name. The young girl kept resting with her eyes on a square hole cutout for a window. Through the opening, she saw leaves from the tree produce flickering bursts of light. Her father called yet again, and Harley rolled to her side to crawl slowly across the creaking hardwood to the window. Her slender fingers braced the cutout's edge, and she pulled herself up to peek out, but to her surprise, her father was gone.

"You been busy," he said.

Harley spun around and plopped at the site of her father's head popping up through the hole in the floor. "She's going to throw them away."

"How do you know that?"

"She told me."

Too big to enter, Adam stood on the ladder studying the walls. Tacked in random places were pages ripped from glossy picture books showing sandy beaches lapped by bubbling waves. In the

pile, he noticed the word *California* in big gold font on the spine of a big thick book. He looked at her with a smile, and then dropped back down through the opening. "I'll be in my office."

As he lowered, Harley rushed to look at the top of his head descending to the base of the tree. Near the ground, Adam dropped off the lowest rungs, wiped his hands, and started toward the house. Pushing herself hard enough to do a backwards roll up to the cutout, Harley watched her father take hold of the screen door.

Adam stepped into a high ceiling room dimmed by a small window curtain facing the tree house. Below the curtain was a white enamel sink and around the sink was a smooth white counter. The entire kitchen, with the exception of the cabinets, made from dark rich wood, took on a shade of gray. Above, a wobbling ceiling fan clacked.

Across the room was a tall, slender hallway with a hardwood floor leading to a crystal glass

front door and walkway to the street. The hallway had white walls adorned with pictures in frames, and beyond was an expansive porch, perfect for relaxing in white wicker chairs draped in cushions. To the left of the front door was Adam's office, and adjacent to his office was a steep staircase leading up to Harley's room. Mounted to the banister was a polished statue of a dancing fairy carved from a slab of cherry wood. On sunny days, light through the crystal glass used the hardwood of the hallway to cast a sepia tone allowing the fairy on the banister to reflect.

Fearing the worst, Harley crept slowly along the white wall of the hallway until arriving at the entrance to her father's office where she peaked in to find him in a small white room sitting behind a large brown desk writing in a ledger. In his hand he held a black shiny ink pen with gold bands, and on the walls were more pictures in frames. Cozy and confined, the room contained her family's history and smelled of Granny apples.

“She plans to visit,” said Adam.

“When?” asked Harley, easing into the room.

“Mave doesn’t make plans,” replied Adam.

“She just shows up.”

The young girl walked to a leather chair resembling a piece of shiny caramel and leaned in to its mahogany trim as if she were a blade of foxtail caught in a bending breeze. “What you writing?”

“Notes for a meeting.”

Harley slid around to the front of the chair’s stuffed leather seat and jump plopped so violently into it she bounced. Distracted, Adam paused. “I don’t want you stealing books.” Harley rolled her eyes and slid off the plump seat. “They cost money to replace, and by the looks of it you did some damage.”

Feeling frumpy, Harley shoved her hands deep into the wide pockets of her overalls and waddle walked out of the room.

The lower floor of the library was a cool cavity

nobody except the brave ventured. Spiders and the dull stench of mildew lingered in the lower depths as if a crypt, but it also meant Sara had privacy, a commodity only the dreadful dank of an old basement affords. Sealed up for decades, she launched an expedition in early spring to discover steps hidden behind a stack of dusty boxes. Following the steps down, she found herself in a low ceiling room dodging cobwebs appearing as feather weight silk rope, and through the curtain of webs she learned of a tiny storage room perfect for an office but packed with books. Nothing special, the room was no more than three light green walls covered in aging plaster protected by a wood door to enter, yet it had potential to be a relaxing escape. With the help of Brice, her college bound assistant, Sara managed to move the books out and replace them with a walnut plantation desk salvaged from an antique store. An elaborate piece of furniture, it took up every inch of the wall with much of the space reserved for rectangle boxes at one time holding mail and important papers. She was at her

desk flipping pages in a decorative paint book when a knock at the door interrupted her. “What is it, Brice?”

“Mrs. Smith’s back.”

Sara reluctantly climbed the steps leading up to the library’s main room, but before entering, secretly peeked out to spy. At the circulation counter was a middle-aged woman with dark curly hair wearing sweat pants for clothes.

“I got another one, Sara. This one has more filth than a grease trap.”

Sara moved behind the counter and took her place. She looked at the book presented to her, read the title, and said, “But this is a classic. It came out in the forties.”

“Maybe so, but I don’t think it belongs in the library. There is stuff in that book that makes me sick.”

“Then why did you read it?” asked Brice. He leaned against the counter nibbling on a sugar cookie.

“I read it because others found it tantalizing.” Sara chuckled. “You find that funny?” asked Mrs. Smith.

“Only because it’s true,” replied Sara. “It’s one of the first books to feature actual descriptions of sex.”

“Sex out of marriage, and in graphic detail,” said Brice, popping the cookie into his mouth and walking away. “We studied it in class.”

Mrs. Smith watched Brice leave then leaned in close. “I do not need to remind you that I serve on the library board. If you plan to have this kind of filth in here, I might need to reconsider your position.”

“Mrs. Smith, any controversies over this title cleared the courts years ago.”

“Maybe the courts of man, but not the court of public opinion. We live in a small community, a community where people still have values.”

Brice returned carrying a box filled with books. Adam followed with another, and Harley followed behind with a small box of her own.

“I think these are all of them,” said Adam, placing his box on the counter.

Mrs. Smith reached into Adam’s box and plucked out a book. “Are these donations?”

“They belong to the library,” replied Adam.

“Don’t you adhere to the book checkout policy we have in place?”

“Yes,” replied Sara, “but this is a special case.”

“Special? How did he acquire all these books?”

Sara leaned over the counter and peered down at Harley.

“You mean to tell me this child had all these books?” The woman rummaged around in the box, lifting spines and reading titles. “Maps and history. What is this girl doing with these books?”

“A report.”

“And you expect me to believe that? I’ve seen enough. Sara, I’m bringing this up at our next board meeting. If you can’t manage the simple task of following rules for everyone, you do not need this job!” Mrs. Smith turned and looked scornfully at Adam. “My son worked for you.” She held her gaze,

then started to the steps leading to the exit.

“That woman is going to be the death of me,” commented Sara.

Adam crouched to look Harley in the eyes. “If I leave you here, can you help them put away the books?”

“She can’t stay here if she’s going to steal books.”

“I have a meeting to get to,” said Adam. “Figure up the damage, and I’ll cover it.”

Behind Adam was darkness and before him light as he stood at a massive window in J.B. Brisco’s relaxing room overlooking a massive green yard leading out to a fountain pluming like a geyser. In the distance was a tree line broken by grazing pastures touching a horizon of blue. Adam stared at the water fighting gravity and felt himself grow dizzy. He lost his balance for a second and teetered a bit so as not to stumble.

“You know why I have that fountain?”

“To scare away crows?”

“To cleanse the air.”

Adam positioned to aim his gaze at J.B, a pudgy, pale-faced man with a stomach made for propping up things such as plates of food and whiskey glasses. Sprawled on a leather couch, J.B. took a short but confident sip from a warm glass of rye resting on his leg and heaved forward to stand up quickly. The leather crackled as it struggled to rebuild itself.

“You look at me, Adam, as if I told you a lie, but the problem is not telling a lie. The problem is selling it. You spoke to Mave?”

J.B. slow walked to a brown wood writing desk where he pushed aside a few papers hiding a near empty pack of cigarettes. He placed the glass on the desk and lifted the pack to fetch a smoke.

Adam replied with silence.

J.B. dug a fat finger into the mouth of the pack, wiggled it a bit, and wormed out a bent cigarette. He studied the cigarette and rolled it between his fingers to feel it loose with tobacco. Tossing the pack on the table he said, “She’s in

town.” Striking a match, J.B. palmed a light and shook out the flame. “She’s staying out at Keller’s Ranch.”

“She never said anything.”

“Well, that’s typical,” said J.B. lifting his glass from the desk. “Good lookin’ women love keeping a man in mystery.” He strolled across the room in a casual manner indicative of a person with too much time on their hands. At an antique mini-bar in the shape of a Earth globe, he touched downed with an assortment of bottles holding various liquors in peculiar shades. “She looks nice, real nice,” he said, resting his glass on a holder and reaching for another to join it. Unscrewing a lid on a tall, slender bottle, he filled each glass to within a few centimeters of being full. “Life’s treating her well.”

“She ran off with a painter,” reminded Adam.

J.B. placed the bottle into the globe and collected the glasses. “Well, I guess she likes the arts.” He held out the whiskey as an olive branch, and Adam rushed to take it. Slurping a sip, J.B. started back to the couch. “You need to let the

factory go. It's over and finished. One thing I learned from helping your daddy is we don't owe this town anything. When you're done, it's done."

"All they have are factories," argued Adam. "There's nothing else for them to do."

"Don't be so dramatic. You closed that factory down because you didn't like running it."

"I closed it because we were on the verge of bankruptcy."

"You know, I sometimes think your daddy sending you off to that college in Delaware did more harm than good. It got your head all messed up with ideas." J.B. aimed his rear at the couch and allowed gravity to pull him into the cushion. "You need to figure out Mave before figuring out how to save the world."

Adam looked out the window. Wind caught the fountain and pushed it down as it spurted to remain upright.

"I know some guys in Montana," said J.B., "hedge fund bankers who buy old buildings and turn them into scrap. They'll either use it or tear it

down.”

“And, where’s that leave me?”

“No place special. Same place you are now, but richer.”

Harley was in the process of reaching to place a book on a high shelf when the door to the library opened. A man in his mid-thirties, wearing a white t-shirt, blue jeans, and chip on a tan, muscular shoulder, started the slow but purposeful task of tromping his work boots up the steps leading to the main room. He wanted the room to know he arrived and took a place in the center as if it were a stage.

“I’m leaving town,” he announced.

“When?” asked Sara, looking up from the counter.

“I got a call to leave tomorrow, but I’m heading out tonight to get a head start.”

“Where to?” asked Brice.

“Tiny town near Louisville.” He refocused on her. “You got no future here, Sara. You need to

come with me.”

“I have work.”

“So do I. It’s called railroad work. Good money, not this.” Harley peaked her head out. He noticed. “Is she your new help?”

“Leave her alone, Zach.”

“They got labor laws, you know.” He walked over to Harley and peered down at her. In a low, whispering voice he said, “Lots and lots of labor laws, but I guess that doesn’t matter, given your dad destroyed the town.”

“That’s enough,” said Brice.

Zach straightened up and looked at the counter. “You a big boy now?”

“Sara, should I call someone?”

“No need to call anyone,” said Zach, as he turned to exit. “I’m leaving.”

“You can’t just let him come in here and do that. I’m gonna call the police.”

“Mind your own business, Brice.” Without another word, she hurried out from behind the counter to the top of the steps in time to see the

door below close shut. A nail-biting second passed until outside, the rumble of a loud muffler roared. Puffing loose bangs from a beading brow, Sara turn to find Harley holding a book.

“I can’t find where it goes.”

Before she had time to react, Harley shoved the book into Sara’s hand and burst toward the exit.

“Harley!”

Jumping down the steps, Sara stumbled out the wide open door left clinging to the toe skidding heat of Harley’s fast departure. On the sidewalk, she stood amazed and confused by the site of blue denim held up by white sole sneakers beating a concrete path away from the library.

Hours passed and shadows stretched. The inside of the tree house cooled, and Harley opened her eyes to a dark wood ceiling when she heard the sound of the screen door slap. A woman’s voice called for her, and Harley thought it came from a dream. She closed her eyes, and the woman called again. Rolling onto her stomach, the girl crawled to

the window. Pulling herself up, she peeked out to see a dignified blonde in a white summer dress staring up at her. “Mave?”

“There you are. Why don’t you come down and be social?”

Backing away from the window, Harley slipped through the cutout in the floor and climbed down the ladder. She jumped to the ground and paused for a moment to wipe sleep sweat from her face. She looked at the screen door, the sky above fading from dark blue to amber, and formed a curious expression before providing, “He’s at a meeting,” for an answer and defiantly cutting a straight path to the house.

Shunned, Mave slouched. “A hug would be nice.”

A strange calm descended as the sole of Harley’s sneaker pressed down on the wooden step leading up. The step creaked and sounds around her amplified. She placed her hand on the worn metal handle of the screen door. The slim, bent curve felt smooth like the inside of an oyster shell.

“Aren’t you happy to see me?” asked Mave. Through wire mesh, Harley peered down the short hallway leading past the staircase to her room and saw the golden light of a sunset brightening the fairy on the banister. “I came a long way. Can’t I at least get a hug?” Harley ignored Mave’s questioning and entered the kitchen. Light from the hallway attracted her from the cold dim to the warmth of her father’s office. Mave yanked open the screen door. “Say something!”

Walking the hallway, Harley let her fingers glide along the surface of the white wall as she hummed a popular melody. She arrived at her father’s office and arched forward to peek in. At his desk, Adam read a sheet of paper. Seated in the caramel chair, a relaxed man in a dark business suit sat silently, observing. The man repositioned and angled his gaze on the door in time to see Mave slip around Harley to enter the office.

“I guess you know she’s back,” said Adam.

“She found me in the tree house,” said Harley.

“Well, it’s getting late,” said the man. “Wife’s expecting me.” He stood and towered over the desk. “I’ll be in touch.” As he walked out of the room, he patted Harley on her head, and she moved forward to lean against the caramel chair.

LATER THE SAME DAY

The door leading out to the front porch opened, and Adam stepped into the light of a warm, humid evening. He held out a comforting glass of Merlot to Mave. She accepted the wine with a sense of arrogant entitlement and said, “You’re getting wiser with age.”

“Washington Merlot,” he replied, walking to the banister. “Probably the only person in town who has a bottle.” He leaned against the white painted wood and held his glass to the light to study the deep rose red.

“You an inspector now?”

“I want you to stay gone, Mave.”

“Yes, I’m sure you do. The whole town hates

me, remember?" She took a sip with a winking smirk.

"Harley doesn't need this."

"I can see you not needing it, but there's a big world out there."

"Too big, I think," Adam commented, looking to the street. He paused as he noticed the sleek form of a smooth, polished sports car bending reflective curves on black paint. "Nice car, Mave. You ever want just simple?"

She replied with a sarcastic, seething chuckle. "Why not put on some of that cool old jazz you used to listen to when times were good, or did you toss them like everything else worth keeping?"

The door to the porch opened, and Harley poked her head out.

"I thought you were sleeping," said Adam.

"Only pretending." Bracing the door, she peered curiously at Mave who in turn smiled cosmetic pleasantries. In Harley's free hand, the young girl clutched a large blue book with a weight of importance.

“What you got there?” asked Mave.

Harley pulled the door tight behind her. “A book.”

“What kind of book?” Harley held it up to show the title. “She’s into maps. When did you get into maps?”

“I want you to show me where you live in California,” said Harley.

Mave jerked back. “Why?”

“She’s curious, Mave,” said Adam. “Go on and show her where you live.”

“But it’s such a small place, Adam, I doubt it shows up.”

“You never know. That’s a pretty big book. I’m sure it’s in there.”

Flustered, Mave scowled at him as he took a casual but determined sip. With whipping action, she snatched the book, and drawing her legs in, placed it on her lap. Harley moved in close. “Please, Harley. You’re blocking the light. I can’t see.” Harley backed up, and the light fell on Mave’s crown of golden hair as she stared at an open page. “It’s not

in here,” she said, in a low voice.

“You haven’t even tried to find it.”

“And, I probably never will.” Mave slapped the book shut, stood, and handed the book back to Harley. “I need to go.”

“What’s its name?” asked Harley.

“Thanks for the wine, Adam. It’s not Washington, but nice try.”

Adam accepted her glass and watched her walk down the porch steps.

“She didn’t even try to find it,” said Harley. Adam was silent but staring. “Dad! She didn’t even try!”

“And, she probably never will,” he muttered.

Dropping the book, Harley leapt from the porch. The girl gave chase down the concrete walkway leading to the street, begging the question again and again until Mave, annoyed at the persistent pestering, pushed her out of the way.

“Mave!” shouted Harley. “What’s the name?” Without another word, Mave stepped into the street, walked to the driver’s side of her car, and

tugged the door open. Harley turned to the house.

“Dad! She didn’t even try to find it!”

“It’s over, Harley. Come inside.”

“But she didn’t even try! She had the book open and never tried!”

Mave’s car roared into motion. Harley reacted to the sight of it speeding off into the camouflage of streetlight shadows by walking out to the middle and waiting until nothing remained except the dim silence of fading red dots racing away into the loneliness of twilight.

DAYS LATER

One. Two. Three. The soft, smooth soles of worn cloth sneakers trudged up the cold staircase leading to the main room of the library. Four. Five. Six, and so forth until Harley’s last step had her centered and surrounded by shelves of books. Behind the counter, Sara had her attention on a pen gliding across a notepad, but sensing curiosity, looked up to see Harley in denim overalls holding a

big blue book. Not a word came from Sara as Harley walked towards her and placed the book on the counter.

“I don’t need this anymore,” said Harley.

Sara set her pen to the side and pulled the book towards her. With a meticulous eye, she thumbed through the pages, inspected the spine, and finished by plucking a slip of yellow paper from a small stack arranged next to a row of tiny stacks. “After you shelve this,” she said, writing on the paper, “I have more books for you to put away. If you’re hungry, there’s some donuts behind the counter.” Sara slid the slip to Harley and resumed writing on her notepad.

Harley took the slip and began a slow walk away from the counter.

“Hey!” called Sara. The young girl looked back with edging tears idling her freckled cheeks. “You forgot the book.”

THE END

“Harley” (Published by Brooks Kohler in 2021.)

This story is fiction. Similarities to any person living or deceased are coincidence.